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'Operation Ratline' Was Barbie's Ticket Out

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When the U.S. Army's Counterintelligence Corps in Germany decided to rid itself of Gestapo leader Klaus Barbie after using him as an agent for almost four years, it thought first of changing his identity and moving him into a refugee camp, and then of simply setting him loose in West Germany to find his way in the world.

Barbie "is a professional intelligence man who is very capable and qualified to take care of himself," said a CIC memo on the subject, "unless this organization persists in remaining his guardian angel." The memo is quoted in the Justice Department report on the U.S. role in protecting Barbie from the French, who wanted him for war crimes.

A new guardian angel appeared in 1950 when the CIC in Germany heard that the CIC in Austria had been operating for three years an underground railroad, called "Operation Ratline," to move Soviet informers and defecting Soviet generals and diplomats out of Europe to safe havens in South America.

"Ratline" also was being used to aid the escape of hundreds of Croatian nationalists (including Croatian leader Ante Pavelic) who not only collaborated with the Nazis but also were accused of massacring several hundred thousand Serbs and 30,000 Jews from 1941 to 1945.

The Justice Department report hinted that the CIC may have supplied money to get the Croatian nationalists out of Europe and the grasp of Yugoslav leader Josef Broz Tito, who almost surely would have tried them for war crimes. Just how many Croats were smuggled out of Yugoslavia is unknown.

Also unknown are the identities of the Soviet defectors and informers who used Ratline, but the Justice Department estimated their number at "somewhere close to 70," according to Allan A. Ryan Jr., the assistant attorney general who directed the Barbie investigation. Ryan discovered that Barbie was smuggled out through Ratline, reportedly the only high-ranking Nazi wanted for war crimes to escape that way.

"Every other Ratline escapee was a Soviet VIP defector or an informant whose lives were at stake if they did not escape the Soviets," George Neagoy, a one-time CIC official who now runs the

commissary at NBC's studios in Washington, said in an interview.

"Barbie was the only Nazi we took out," said Neagoy, who personally escorted Barbie and at least a dozen Soviets to safe havens from 1950 to 1951. Ryan said he believes Neagoy's statement is correct.

Neagoy said he recalls little about Barbie, his wife or his two children, who kept to themselves on train rides from Augsburg, Germany, to Salzburg, Austria, and from Salzburg to Genoa, where they were put aboard a ship bound for Argentina.

"Barbie and his wife were frightened and concerned the whole trip, like a couple of scared dogs," Neagoy said.

Although the CIC paid all Ratline expenses, the man who made it work was a Croatian priest, Krunaslow Draganovic, a seminary teacher in Rome.

Justice said the CIC had no illusions about Draganovic, whom the CIC described in a memo as a "fascist and war criminal whose contacts with South American diplomats are of a similar class." Nonetheless, the Justice Department report said, the CIC leaped at the chance to use Draganovic, in part because he also served as DP [Displaced Person] Chief for the Vatican.

Draganovic, who died last month in Yugoslavia before Ryan was able to interview him, was described by the CIC as a "ruthless and unscrupulous" man who charged exorbitant prices for Ratline escapes. His price was \$500 for a child, \$1,000 for an adult, \$1,400 for a VIP and more than \$1,500 for anybody over 60.

When Ratline started in 1947, Draganovic apparently arranged to get false identity papers for Ratline users from an unidentified American who served as chief of the Eligibility Office of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in Rome.

The arrangement with the IRO lasted only a few months because, according to the CIC, the American who was forging the identity papers "suddenly lost his mental stability through over-indulgence in alcohol and disclosed some of the details of the arrangement to his superiors and other official agencies in Rome which required us to realign the operation."

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